



The Question of The Restitution of The African Heritage Preserved in The Museums of The Western World

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Abstract

All the great Western powers have their museums dedicated to African art. The development of museums or collections of African art in the West coincided with colonization and the rise of missionary action. Most of these collections are in fact the result of military looting, theft or illegal sales. Several voices have been raised calling for the return of this artistic heritage to Africa. But the debate on restitution is not new. Abdou Sylla, in a study devoted to the "Return and restitution of cultural property to its country of origin: objects and motifs" published in 2005 (13 years before the Sarr-Savoy report!) in the journal Ethiopiques No. 75, reminds us that the issue of return and restitution was first raised and taken up by two former Directors-General of UNESCO : first René Maheu and then Amadou Mahtar Mbow. If today the question is still being asked, it is because "we still observe that all European and North American ethnological museums, but also private collections, are full of art objects and cultural property that belonged to the formerly dominated peoples who created them".

Keywords: Ethiopiques, Colonization, African art, Western museums.

Introduction

All the great Western powers have their museums dedicated to African art¹. The development of museums or collections of African art in the West coincided with colonization and the rise of missionary action. Most of these collections are in fact the result of military looting, theft or illegal sales. Several voices have been raised calling for the return of this artistic heritage to Africa. But the debate on restitution is not new. Abdou Sylla, in a study devoted to the "Return and restitution of cultural property to its country of origin: objects and motifs" published in 2005 (13 years before the Sarr-Savoy report!) in the journal Ethiopiques No. 75, reminds us that the issue of return and restitution was first raised and taken up by two former Directors-General of UNESCO : first René Maheu and then Amadou Mahtar Mbow². If today the question is still being asked, it is because "we still observe that all European and North American ethnological museums, but also private collections, are full of art objects and cultural property that belonged to the formerly dominated peoples who created them"³.

¹ The term generally refers to traditional artistic creations from Africa south of the Sahara.

² Amadou Mahtar Mbow in an appeal of 7 June 1978 declared that "these cultural goods which are part of their being, the men and women of these countries have the right to recover them".

³ "Retour et restitution de biens culturels à leur pays d'origine" : Objets et motifs" publié en 2005 dans la revue Ethiopiques n° 75

But there is an anti-restitution lobby coming mostly from museums and art dealers. The idea that African museums are not fit to receive returned works or that African cultural policies are not up to scratch is often raised by critics of restitution. Abdou Sylla, in another study dating from 2006 (12 years before the Sarr-Savoy report!) published in the journal *Ethiopiennes* n°76 and entitled "Return and restitution of cultural property to its country of origin: difficulties and challenges", shows that "the scope and diversity of initiatives and actions already undertaken or underway are undeniable"⁴. The author underlines the technical and legal difficulties, but also the psychological obstacles and the "inevitable reluctance" inherent in the 1970 UNESCO Convention. He approaches the situation with important and difficult questions:

"Will these Western countries be willing to relinquish these cultural values ? Are these values now national assets of these industrialized countries and as such integral to their national cultural heritage? Is it possible to draw up complete inventories of all these heritages ? Under what conditions and modalities will this return and restitution be carried out ? Will the holder countries agree to return them without compensation ? Do the dispossessed countries have the means to repurchase, conserve, treat and develop this heritage once it has been returned? "⁵

Today, while these difficulties and reticence still persist and most of the countries holding these objects taken from Africa refuse to return them, it is gratifying to hear the French President, Emmanuel Macron, speak of "temporary or definitive restitution"⁶ of this African heritage, which is a prisoner of Western museums or collectors.

My purpose is first of all to recall the conditions under which African art objects have entered Western museums and to return to the current debate on their restitution.

1. Collections of African art in Western museums⁷

The authors of *Restituer le patrimoine africain*, a report commissioned by Emmanuel Macron, Felwine Sarr and Bénédicte Savoy rightly point out that "the active search for cultural goods and their transfer to European capitals was at the heart (...) of the colonial enterprise"⁸. One cannot speak of the restitution of African objects without calling for colonialism. The colonizers felt that they had saved and enhanced the value of these objects. They had set up institutions in their colonies themselves to collect the objects of the material culture of the colonized peoples. The aim was to prove the need to bring civilization to these barbaric peoples. The missionaries played an important role in this transfer of objects: they asked the colonized to throw away their objects of worship in order to be converted to their new religion. But these objects were most often found in European museums. During several centuries of domination, says Abdou Sylla, "they acquired, accumulated and preserved priceless cultural goods and values that belonged to the peoples they had colonized. In these countries, in addition to the public cultural heritage, there are still many private collections, made up of a great many cultural goods belonging to the formerly colonized peoples"⁹.

⁴ *Revue Ethiopiennes*, n°76, 2006

⁵ "Retour et restitution de biens culturels à leur pays d'origine" : Objets et motifs" publié en 2005 dans la revue *Ethiopiennes* n° 75

⁶ In his speech delivered on November 28, 2017 at the University of Ouaga 1 in Burkina Faso

⁷ Part of this sub-chapter is already developed in my article "Arts d'Afrique noire et musées occidentaux", *Revue Ethiopiennes* n°89, 2012.

⁸ Felwine Sarr and Bénédicte Savoy in *Restituer le patrimoine africain*, Philippe Rey and Seuil, 2018, p.27.

⁹ Abdou Sylla, « Retour et restitution des biens culturels à leur pays d'origine : objets et motifs », in *Ethiopiennes* magazine n°75, 2005.

The British, French and German colonists brought back to their countries some of these artistic "curiosities" that gave an exotic colour to their homes. With the British punitive expedition to the kingdom of Ashanti in 1874 and to Benin in 1897, certain missions such as those of Léo Frobenius in West Africa and the Congo, the scientific mission Dakar-Djibouti led by Michel Leiris and Marcel Griaule in 1931, which rounded up thousands of objects, we can speak of a systematic and organized looting of African art objects.

From the first exhibitions of African objects in France (Galerie Devambez, *Art nègre et océanien*, Paris, 1919 ; Galerie Le Portique, *Exposition d'art nègre*, catalogue, Carl Einstein, Paris, 1925) to the exhibitions of the Museum of Primitive Art in New York in the 1960s, the interest in knowing more about African art proved essential. It began to be the subject of scientific and ethnological investigation. Thus, from the 1960s onwards, Western art dealers travelled through Black Africa to buy objects on the spot. Many of these works of art now enrich the ethnographic collections of the most famous Western museums. These include the Royal Museum of Africa in Tervuren, Belgium (more than a century of collections and more than 180,000 objects of African art), the British Museum with more than 69,000 objects from Africa, the Museum of Ethnography of Hungary with its African collection of more than 10,000 African objects, and the Vienna Museum with more than 37,000 objects from Africa, the Musée du Quai Branly in Paris with its African collection of more than 70,000 objects, the Pierre-le-Grand Museum of Anthropology and Ethnography in Saint Petersburg, the Smithsonian Museum of African Art in Washington, the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, the Art Institute in Chicago, and many other American and European university museums. After the Herero extermination in 1904 in Namibia, more than 300 human heads were taken and sent to Germany. Thousands of African bones and skulls are in several museums in Europe. Colonization was not only military and economic, it also meant dispossessing Africans of their material culture. The historian Achille Mbembe was right to say that "colonial violence spared neither human beings nor property. Its ultimate goal was the de-symbolization of the lives of Africans"¹⁰.

All of these institutions today manage an enormous collection of African objects whose status has changed over time. It was first and foremost seafarers, missionaries, collectors, employees of colonial states, doctors, journalists and development workers who were the first to bring these objects to Europe. In the beginning, these objects were not exhibited for aesthetic purposes, they were only used as exotic decorations for colonial propaganda. Today, there are several networks of collectors of African art objects and dealers ready to do anything to obtain precious objects.

African women are also responsible for the trafficking and theft of objects. According to Abdou Sylla, "since the Independences, almost all national ethnographic museums have been victims of theft. This is a disaster for the cultural heritage they house"¹¹. Indeed, several thousand objects of African art such as masks and figurines that are now in Europe and the United States have been stolen from museums and villages.

These thefts are also sometimes carried out by Africans themselves. This looting, due to poverty, wars, the value of African art (according to Interpol, the illicit traffic of African art objects is estimated at nearly 400 million US dollars per year) is done in the face of government indifference. With difficult conditions of survival, and with a demand incomprehensible to them from Europeans, African populations have started to sell everything they could sell. The civil and ethnic wars also greatly favored the systematic looting of museums or archaeological sites. Today, it is mainly Africans who steal and sell the objects. This fraudulent market is well known to western museums and merchants.

It is worth remembering that not all the objects exhibited in Western museums come from theft or looting. But while some were purchased, most were taken during multiple raids by settlers.

¹⁰ Jeune Afrique, Online Magazine, March 13, 2018

¹¹ In " Les musées en Afrique : entre pillage et irresponsabilité ", *Africultures*, n°70, 2007

2. The issue of restitution

Now that African art has its own section in many major art museums, African governments have tried to put an end to trafficking and looting by creating laws regulating the removal of art objects. But too often these laws are incomplete or violated, and restitution remains an exception. Within UNESCO, years of debate, study and research have led to the 1970 Convention which sets out measures to prevent and prohibit the illicit import, export and transfer of ownership of cultural property. However, this Convention was only adopted by the UN General Assembly on 22 October 1987 by Resolution 42/7 entitled "Return or Restitution of Cultural Property to its Countries of Origin". During the vote, the countries concerned by the Convention and the Resolution, such as "the current European Union, the United States of America, Australia and Israel, which have "during several centuries of domination, acquired, accumulated and preserved priceless cultural property and values"¹², abstained.

This Convention recognizes that theft is a principal cause of the impoverishment of the cultural heritage of countries of origin. However, a large number of countries have not yet ratified this convention. It is not so much regulations and customs services that they have problems, but rather the restitution of national heritage. And even if signed, this convention will be difficult to apply strictly since it is very difficult to define what objects to return, difficult to find these objects, difficult to acquire them and difficult to know to whom to return them. Abdou Sylla raises the question of the return and restitution of these objects in the following terms: "under what conditions and modalities will this return and restitution be carried out? Will the holder countries agree to return them without compensation? Do the dispossessed countries have the means to repurchase, conserve, treat and develop this heritage once it has been returned ? "¹³.

The authors of *Restituer le patrimoine africain*, Felwine Sarr and Bénédicte Savoy, propose, as far as France is concerned, "the chronological, legal, methodological and financial framework within which the return of African heritage to Africa can be carried out"¹⁴. They ask essential questions such as: "which Africa for which restitutions? "To whom should we return it? The two authors tell us that in the former French colonies, in the Quai Branly collection alone, Chad "comes out on top (9296 objects). It is followed by Cameroon (7838), the island of Madagascar (7590), Mali (6910), the Ivory Coast (3951), Benin (3157), the Republic of Congo (2593), Gabon (2448), Senegal (2281) and Guinea (1997)¹⁵. Ethiopia (3081 objects), Ghana (1656) and Nigeria (1148), DRC (1428), Southern Africa without Madagascar (1692), East Africa (2262) are also present in the collections of the musée quai Branly¹⁶.

This work should also be done in Germany, Belgium and all other western museums where African art objects are to be found.

If one considers all the objects produced in a society, the dispersal of these pieces is an alienation. The fundamental idea is that the objects of a society belong to it and must return to it. It is true that these objects, once returned to Africa, will not be able to play the same role as before. But let the critics of this return stop thinking that because Africa does not have enough museums to put these thousands of objects in, it would be better to keep them in the West. It's a false debate. Cameroon has a museum dating from 1935, Ghana from 1957, Chad from 1962, Benin from 1966, Madagascar from 1962, Mali from 1982, Rwanda from 1989. And a museum of black civilizations is inaugurated in Dakar in December 2018. The African museum landscape is now under construction.

In the refusal to return African art objects that are prisoners of Western museums, there is also the pretext of universalism or cultural diversity. Some detractors of the return of objects to Africa maintain that the fact of conserving them in the West is part of the cultural mix between

¹² Abdou Sylla, " Retour et restitution des biens culturels à leur pays d'origine : objets et motifs ", in *Ethiopiennes magazine* n°75, 2005.

¹³ *Ibidem*

¹⁴ *Restituer le patrimoine africain*, Philippe Rey and Seuil, 2018, p.17

¹⁵ *Op. cit.* p.78

¹⁶ For these figures, see pages 78-80 of *Restituer le patrimoine africain*, Felwine Sarr and Bénédicte Savoy

peoples and situates them in the dialectic of the Same and the Other¹⁷. But this cultural mixing through art is a trap set for Africa, it is a deceptive phenomenon that we must be wary of. For beyond the project of coexistence between Elsewhere and Here, African art, under house arrest in Western museums, will always be determined by the Western doxa, which decides its conditions of visibility.

But what will be done with these objects once they return to Africa? Should they then be returned to their original functions? I don't think so, especially since with Islamization many societies have renounced these objects. Should we put them back in museums where Africans will not come to see them because they don't consider them as exhibition objects? Abdou Sylla points out in his article "Museums in Africa: between looting and irresponsibility" that :

"Ancient Africa, known as traditional or pre-colonial Africa, ignored the museum tradition as practised by the West. Instead of a museum, it used barns or backyards or the spaces between the roofs of the huts and their walls. The barn itself did not have the same meaning as in the West, since in Africa it was a matter of small huts in the family enclosure, somewhere behind, or old dilapidated huts into which objects, sometimes also various tools, were thrown pell-mell. The villagers also know that between the sloping roofs and the walls there are spaces, often fenced in, where people keep their crops, objects and various luggage. In these different places of the family concession were intermingled the "objects d'art"¹⁸.

What if the Africans decided neither to put them back into their original context nor to exhibit them ? The Curator of the Museum of Black Civilizations in Dakar, my colleague Hamady Bocoum, ironically said : "If we wanted to burn them?" a way of saying that these objects belong to Africa and must be returned to the Africans, who alone will decide what to do with them. The need for this return of cultural objects and property to Africa is now recognized as legitimate by international cultural organizations such as UNESCO and African museum professionals.

It is regrettable that the authors of Restoring African Heritage did not mention the names of Abdou Sylla or Iba Ndiaye Diadji once in their report. The Senegalese invited to the Dakar workshop that took place on 12 June 2018 at the Theodore Monod Museum of African Art of IFAN-Sheikh Anta DIOP were not in the best position to address the issue. The two philosophers mentioned above are inescapable in Senegal on the issue of the restitution of African cultural property. Professor Iba Ndiaye Diadji, who died in 2003, wrote about the looting of African cultural property and its restitution¹⁹, and Professor Abdou Sylla, despite his age, could well give his opinion on the matter since he wrote about it in several articles, two of which were published in *Ethiopiennes*²⁰ No. 75 in 2005 and No. 76 in 2006, and one in *Africultures*²¹ No. 70 in 2007. I may be wrong, but I do not know to date what the Senegalese invited to the Dakar workshop have written or what research they have carried out on the issue. This type of report is a serious matter. We cannot afford, as academics, to ignore or not know what has already been written on the issue by Senegalese researchers.

I would like to conclude on the issue of reparation. After restitution, the question of reparation will certainly be raised. As early as 1955, Aimé Césaire asked himself the following question : "The Indians massacred, the Muslim world emptied of itself, the Chinese world for a good century, soiled and denatured, the Negro world disqualified, immense voices forever extinguished, homes scattered to the wind, all this mess, all this waste, Humanity reduced to monologue, and you believe that all this cannot be paid for ?"²², wrote Aimé Césaire in the *Discourse on Colonialism*. The Sarr-Savoy

¹⁷ Read my article " Arts d'Afrique noire et musées occidentaux ", in *Revue Ethiopiques* n°89, 2012, pages 208 to 282. I say enough on the subject and I do not think it is necessary to come back to it here.

¹⁸ In « Les musées en Afrique : entre pillage et irresponsabilité », *Africultures*, n°70, 2007

¹⁹ All they had to do was read *L'impossible art africain*, PUD, 2003; *Créer l'art africain*, éditions Dëkkando, 2002.

²⁰ - Retour et restitution de biens culturels à leur pays d'origine : Objets et motifs", *Ethiopiennes* n° 75, 2005.

- Retour et restitutions des biens culturels à leur pays d'origine : difficultés et enjeux", *Revue Ethiopiques*, n°76, 2006

²¹ See "Les musées en Afrique : entre pillage et irresponsabilité", *Africultures*, n° 70, 2007.

²² Aimé Césaire, *Discourse on Colonialism*, Présence Africaine, Paris, 1955, p. 37

report almost dodged the question of reparation, the authors only mention it on one page²³ out of the 240 pages of the full document. They write:

"The thorny question of reparation cannot be evaded. It is often raised in the context of crimes against humanity (the Herero and Nama genocide), violent massacres linked to colonial conquest, or the predation of economic resources, where the loss seems more easily quantifiable. However, as far as heritage is concerned, it must be understood that it is not only objects that have been taken, but reserves of energy, creative resources, deposits of potential, forces for generating alternative figures and forms of reality, powers of germination; and that this loss is immeasurable because it entails a type of relationship and mode of participation in the world that is irremediably obviated. Returning the objects will not compensate for it"²⁴.

It is obvious that because they were commissioned, the two authors could not speak otherwise. How can we think once that what has been taken from us is incomensurable and "immeasurable"? The question of restitution and that of reparation are inseparable. Whether symbolic or financial, reparation must be made. Westerners have looted and snatched cultural property from Africa, have accumulated very significant financial resources with the millions of entries of these objects on display in their museums, and we want to sketch out the question of reparation?

To talk about reparation, I take the liberty, in what follows, to present in such detail Manthia Diawara's point of view in an open letter addressed to the French President entitled "Letter from Africa to Macron : Reparation rather than Restitution !" published in Médiapart on 16 December 2019, to show that he was right. He was right to write: "we prefer reparation to restitution". The question of the restitution of heritage, "is yet another trick set up by the West to distract Africans from the real problems facing them".

We must first, he says, solve the problem of reparation before talking about restitution. Africa continues to be plundered and robbed of its natural and material resources by foreign powers. This makes the continent increasingly impoverished and pushes young Africans to face the Mediterranean Sea to hope for a better tomorrow. For Manthia Diawara, sending African cultural goods back to Africa is only a reminder of the "daily expulsions of Africans" from Europe.

African countries are increasingly indebted to the West, China and Russia. And the West has found African specialists to say that development and progress are "white people's things"²⁵.

Following the example of countries such as France, Germany, Japan or Israel which, after the Second World War, benefited from reparation before the restitution of their cultural property, Manthia Diawara rightly demands reparation before the restitution of African cultural heritage. In the same way that the United States of America, with the Marshall Plan, had paid billions of dollars to several European and Asian countries to "enable them to get back on their feet after the massive destruction of their economies and democracies", Diawara also believes, and rightly so, that "Africa must also be repaired for the imputations committed by Europe". It will not be a question of financial reparation for the African states concerned by the plundering of these objects, but of setting up major development programmes without expecting anything in return, as is the case now with this aid, which has none, with all these Western companies that only benefit from African resources. The author of "Letter from Africa to Macron : Reparation rather than restitution !" writes: "Instead of throwing Africans daily into the Mediterranean Sea, pay us with Reparation, because the majority of African emigrants in the West would return to African countries if they had the same opportunities

²³ Fin page 33 et la page 34

²⁴ Sarr-Savoy, Rapport sur la restitution du patrimoine culturel africain. Vers une nouvelle éthique relationnelle, novembre 2018, p.34

²⁵ On this subject, see Axel Kabou, Et si l'Afrique refusait le développement ? L'Harmattan, 1991 ; or Felwine Sarr, Afrotopia, Philip Rey, 2016.

for work, cross-border mobility and human rights that Europe, in theory, offers today". These programmes will have to be financed by "European and American taxpayers who are the first to benefit from Africa's natural resources, but also the first to vote against black immigration to their countries".

After the compensation paid to the Jewish community plundered by the Nazis during World War II, the compensation paid by Berlin to the Jews of Algeria who were victims of antisemitic measures, the Maori compensated by Great Britain after being dispossessed of their land by the colonists of the Empire in 1863, why should Africans not also claim compensation for the crimes of slavery and colonization? Acknowledging that African cultural property was stolen and deciding centuries later to return it is not enough. Westerners must also pay reparation, not financially, but through the implementation of vast programmes for Africa's development, such as: construction and equipment of universities and schools for training, quality hospitals, agricultural and industrial enterprises, dams, water and environmental management, land and air transport infrastructure, research and innovation institutions, etc. - and without expecting anything in return.

Works Citation

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